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ABSTRACT

An approach to assessment is described that allows students to understand and help decide the criteria for good work. It is called "negotiable contracting." Negotiable contracting consists of giving students shared ownership in their own learning. The teacher serves as a facilitator of discussion of the assessment process. Students and the teachers work together to define what they think is quality work. The rubric is an important part of using negotiable contracting for formal assessment. A rubric is a carefully designed ratings chart that is drawn up jointly by the teacher and students. Along one side of the rubric are the criteria that both parties decide are the most important ideas to be mastered in the lesson, and across the top are the rankings that are used to decide how well the students understand each criterion. Within each ranking there may be numerical gradations. Rubrics can be especially effective in assessing student work in mathematics or in any area that requires problem solving. An example is given of the use of negotiable contracting in a poetry unit. Rubrics offer an important way for educators to motivate students through assessment. Giving students a voice in their grading provides them with a clear understanding of what is expected of them and the assurance that their accomplishments will be recognized. (Contains 4 tables and 13 references.) (SLD)

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Empowering Students through Negotiable Contracting

What would happen if students were invited to help decide how their work should be evaluated? Would they exploit the opportunity, designing standards so ridiculously low as to guarantee a glut of effortless good grades?

Surprisingly, the answer is no. Experience at Robert Wagner Middle School in Manhattan shows that students who are given a role in the assessment process can and do rise to the occasion. Given the appropriate direction by their teachers, youngsters are able to accurately evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and pinpoint where to focus their efforts to get the most out of what they're learning. As a result, students view assessment not as an arbitrary form of reward or humiliation (a common perception of middle school students), but as a positive tool for personal growth.

This article examines "negotiable contracting," a new approach to involving students in the assessment process that currently is being implemented in some schools in the New York City area. Negotiable contracting is adaptable to both arts and science curriculum and is flexible enough to accommodate multi-modal forms of learning. Like any assessment, it ensures that the teacher remains squarely in charge of the classroom and, ultimately, responsible for assuring that grading is appropriate.

Empowering Students

The art of negotiable contracting consists of giving students shared ownership in their own learning (Wiggins 1993). - Although he is ultimately responsible for grading, the teacher functions not as an all-powerful judge of students' work but as a facilitator of discussion on the assessment process (Seeley 1994). Before the teacher presents his or her own expectations of the work, he asks students their opinion of what **they** think would constitute quality work. Across the "negotiating table," teacher and class arrive at a consensus that is mutually acceptable. The result is that students feel like valued participants in the assessment process. Thus, they are motivated to strive toward those criteria-based standards.

The contract process can be used **independently** of a formal evaluation and can serve a variety of purposes. Some lessons do not call for formal assessment. However, the teacher still wants to set short term goals by establishing criteria for high quality work. Negotiable contracting

is ideal for such a lesson. For example, if students are to work together in groups, negotiable contracting is helpful in setting up expectations such as cooperative roles, research materials and formats for charts and graphs.

Creating the Rubric

The rubric is an important element of using negotiable contracting for formal assessment. (Pate, Homestead, and McGinnis 1993). A rubric is a carefully designed ratings chart that is drawn up **jointly** by teacher and students. Along one side of the rubric are listed the criteria that the teacher and students decide are the most important ideas to be mastered in the lesson. Across the top of the rubric are listed the rankings that will be used to assess how well students understand each of those criterion. The rubric also indicates how much importance should be given to each criterion, based on its importance to the overall lesson. Within each ranking, there also may be numerical gradations, depending on whether a student performs on the higher or lower level of that category. Unlike a traditionally assigned, generalized number or letter grade, the rubric serves as an in-depth "report card" for a lesson, unit, or project.

Let's take as an example a social studies teacher at Robert Wagner Middle School. Mrs. Polin, who assigned her students the task of creating a mural for a geography lesson. Before they began any work on the murals, she arranged the class in cooperative learning groups and asked them to consider, "If you were me, what qualities would **you** look for in deciding how to grade each mural? Come up with six criteria that you would look for." After allowing time for discussion, Mrs. Polin asked each group to rank the qualities they had selected in order of importance, from most important to least important.

Next, each group presented its top two criteria to the class. Mrs. Polin listed those criteria on the board and the class was asked to choose which ones were truly most relevant to the lesson. With the teacher's guidance, they agreed on three qualities: 1) detail and depth; 2) a clear focal point; and 3) high-quality design. They then were asked, "What should be considered "poor," "fair," "good" and "excellent" performance for each criterion?" One student suggests that a poor mural would have most of the facts wrong, and the other students readily agree. "What about if only some of the facts are wrong?" Mrs. Polin asks. "That would be a fair grade," says one boy. "I think having some of the facts wrong should still be a poor grade," argued another student. Finally, after some more discussion, a consensus is reached among the class that getting only some of the facts wrong would earn a 'fair' grade. After more

discussion, they also decide that getting all the facts right should earn a 'good' grade while getting an exceptional amount of accurate, interesting information from unusual sources would earn a rating of excellent.

As a result of their negotiations, before they've even picked up a pencil or pen, Mrs. Polin's students are perfectly clear about what is expected in their murals. Moreover, they have the satisfaction of having had a voice in setting the objectives for the project and establishing a ratings system that they consider to be fair.

Criteria:
Accurate Detail and Depth
Clear Focal Point
High Quality Design

The next step in creating a rubric, is to negtiate ratings to reflect how well each of these criterion are met. Across the top of the rubric chart are listed the various rankings, in lieu of grades or numbers. Again, those rankings may be decided during negotiations between teacher and class. There is a separate rating for each of the criteria in the rubric, since students naturally will be stronger in some aspects of their work than in others.

Choosing neutral words for each rating avoids the implication of good/bad inherent in a generalized A-F or numerical grade. In addition, the natural temptation of instructors -- as well as students -- to award a middle ranking is avoided by the use of an even number of rankings. For example, in a 1-5 ranking system, 3 tends to be used as a "neutral" grade.

Attempted	Acceptable	Admirable	Awesome

or

Novice	Apprentice	Veteran	Master

The State of Kentucky, which uses a rubric system of assessment, utilizes four non-pejorative ratings in its rubrics. In ascending order of competence, they are Novice, Apprentice, Proficient and Distinguished:

Novice	Apprentice	Proficient	Distinguished

There is no "overall" rating for the child; the terms are used separately to evaluate students' performance for **each** of the criterion in the rubric. For a social studies report, for examples, the ratings might be defined as follows:

- "Novice" is a student who has absorbed little of the lesson; it signals insufficient preparation, weak conclusions or organization and incorrect information.
- "Apprentice" implies a beginning conceptual understanding; there is a main idea but it is presented only in broad outline with little detail and some erroneous or unclear information.
- "Proficient" signals a clear conceptual understanding of the lesson; the report was well organized, logical and focused with few errors.
- "Distinguished" means outstanding work; work rich in depth and precise detail with a consistent, powerful presentation and little to no errors.

It is useful to include numeral gradations within each category. For example, a student may receive an Apprentice rating of three or four, depending on whether he performs on a higher or lower end of that category.

Let's examine how Mrs. Polin's class created the rubric for their geography mural.

MURAL	Novice	Apprentice	Veteran	Master
Accurate Detail and Depth	Incorrect or little facts, hardly any detail (1-3 pts.)	Some facts are accurate, some detail (4-6 pts.)	Substantial amount of facts, good amount of detail (7-9 pts.)	Exceptional amount of facts, vivid descriptions (10-12 pts.)
Clear Focus	Vague and unclear (1-2 pts.)	Some focus, but not organized enough (3-4 pts.)	Well organized and clearly presented (5-6 pts.)	Highly organized and easy to follow (7-8 pts.)
Design	Little to no layout and design (1-3 pts.)	Simple design, but layout could be more organized (4-6 pts.)	Attractive and invites the viewer (7-9 pts.)	Exceptional design and outstanding visual appeal (10-12 pts.)

Creative Problem Solving

Rubrics can be especially effective in assessing student's work in mathematics (Moon 1993). While rote skills such as memorizing the times tables may be best suited to traditional quizzing and grading, the majority of mathematics really involves creative problem solving in which there are several ways to arrive at a solution -- some more succinct, effective or creative than others.

For a lesson involving word problems in fractions, for example, the "report card" for students' problem-solving might include an assessment criteria decided upon by teacher and students: Is the solution easy to follow? Does it demonstrate clear conceptual understanding? Would the answer work in real life? Do the diagrams, sentences and number coordinate?

Similarly, rubrics can be used in any discipline-based or interdisciplinary lesson. The rubric can include opportunities for students to use journal work, projects, research studies, experiments, skits or other vehicles to demonstrate their competence.

Good Poetry

Let's look at how a rubric would be utilized in Mrs. Bartko's 8th grade Language Arts class, which is studying a unit on poetry. After discussing how poetry differs from prose and looking at various types of poetry, the students are given the assignment of writing a poem of their own. Mrs. Bartko then asks: "How can a poem-- a subjective assignment with no 'correct' answer-- be fairly assessed?"

The students launch into a discussion of what constitutes "good" poetry. Working in groups, they come up with a rubric, composed of four main criteria that Mrs. Bartko and the students agree are the most appropriate and fair qualities. They decide a poem should: portray emotion and/or imagery; captivate the reader; use language clearly; and use punctuation purposefully. Mrs. Bartko and her students then read various examples of how those skills are applied at the various ratings levels. Finally, before filling in the rubrics with her students as a whole group, she asks the youngsters-- sitting in cooperative work groups -- to try to evaluate the assignment and fill in the rubric on their own:

Poetry	Novice	Apprentice	Veteran	Master
Ability to Captivate the Reader	Unfocused; author seems unsure of direction (1-2 pts.)	Some focus, but lacks continuity (3-4 pts.)	Well-focused and interests reader throughout (5-6 pts.)	Captivates and involves reader deeply (7-8 pts.)
Sensory Images	Difficult to visualize image or emotion (1-3 pts.)	Some use of image, idea, or emotion (4-6 pts.)	Clear use of sensory images to portray ideas or emotions (7-9 pts.)	Vivid, detailed images and intensely felt emotion (10-12 pts.)
Use of Language	Imprecise or inappropriate choice of words (1-2 pts.)	Expresses thoughts marginally (3-4 pts.)	Appropriate choice of language (5-6 pts.)	Uses rich and imaginative language (7-8 pts.)

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Punctuation	Arbitrary punctuation (1-2 pts.)	Some meaningful punctuation (3-4 pts.)	Punctuation meaningful throughout (5-6 pts.)	Punctuation enhances conveyance of thoughts and images (7-8 pts.)

In addition to the rubric itself, there is an area included for comments. In this space, Mrs. Bartko can be even more specific about strengths and weaknesses and, accentuating the positive, suggest ways for each student to stretch his skills and expand his understanding. As a result, the rubric gives the student an overall picture of his or her skill level.

At Robert Wagner Middle School, some teachers have enlarged a blank rubric and laminated it. For each project, they use a dry erase marker and fill in the quadrants with the students. They do likewise with the assessment sheet. Students are each given a blank sheet and asked to fill it out with the teacher. Here, students have their own record of what is expected of them. At the end of the project, they may be asked to assess themselves and/or their peers and hand in the assessment sheet for the teacher to grade.

Recognizing Achievements

Rubrics thus offer an important way for educators to motivate students through assessment. Giving youngsters a voice in their grading provides them with a clear understanding of what is expected of them and the assurance that their accomplishments will be recognized.

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